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A Picture of Decadence

In “As I Lay Dying”¹, William Faulkner presents his readers with a southern poor family, which is facing the foreseeable passing of their mother. We are introduced to the Bundrens through their own perspectives and those of their neighbors. This allows readers to not only see things the way this peculiar family sees them, but also to see them as those around them, with their different worldviews, feel about the unfolding events. For instance, the first narrator we get is Darl, telling the readers about his and Jewel’s return home to encounter their brother Cash working on their mother’s coffin while their neighbors sit, staring at their dying mother, chitchat about their own problems and whisper their disapproval of Dewey Dell’s attire and of Anse’s unwillingness to support his family. Thus, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* depicts the image of a disfunctional southern family in the post-belum era through the Bundrens and their distorted family interactions among themselves and with their neighbors.

The Bundrens’ and their neighbors accounts reveal the thoughts and feelings of Addie’s children and family regarding her death. Cora seems to believe that Darl is heartbroken over Addie’s nearing death; however, from his own narration and Dewey Dell’s account, readers can tell that he is not as distraught as Cora believes, rather he is baffled by his lack of feelings towards his own mother. Likewise, Cora also seems to believe Jewel is a wild and cold person, but when Jewel narrates his own thoughts, readers get to realize that he is the only one of

¹ The edition of “*As I Lay Dying*” used for this paper was printed in New York by Vintage Books in 1990.

Addie's children who is in fact appalled by how his family and neighbors are turning Addie's illness into a spectacle. His hostility towards their actions is viewed by the other characters as a form of rejection and disrespect, but readers know through his words that the reality is quite different.

Similarly, their other siblings are later on described through their own narrations and those of each other. Dewey Dell allows readers to understand how perceptive and analytic Darl truly is. His cleverness and introspectiveness leave him in an uncertain and separate ground from those around him, as Vernon himself describes him as needing a wife (Faulkner). It is almost as if they qualify his introversion as a defect or sign of madness. And, it is due to Dewey Dell's description of Darl's behavior that readers discover her pregnant state after her encounter with Lavee and how she wishes that Peabody would help her get rid of her baby.

In short, the novel presents a series of instances in which death is turned into an excuse for the characters to seek their own personal goals. Anse wants to take Addie to her hometown for burying her so that he can get himself teeth, and goes to the extent of sending his two sons to work while knowing they might not be there for their mother's death. Dewey Dell wants to go to town so that she can attempt to abort her baby and Vardaman, even in his infant lack of understanding for his mother's death, thinks that going to town might earn him a toy train he wants. One can take this initial glimpse into the Bundren family and consider it the picture of the decaying southern family and their values. As several of these family members do not show much respect for the death of one of their own and turn it into a display of selfishness and search for their own personal interests.